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THE DIAMOND

By

J. Robert King & Ed Greenwood

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She floated in beauty at the center of it all: a creature of pure light, her raiment a rainbow, her scepter a staff of lightning, her eyes twin blue flames.

Paladin and Hero fell to their faces before her.

Her song now was one of triumph as her power blazed brighter. The black tentacles clutching the diamond ignited, their flames adding to the brilliance. The globe of mirrors melted away, and a

blast of pure force roared out amid the circling stars and wandering moons.

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THE DIAMOND
J. Robert King & Ed Greenwood

To Peter Archer, who has labored mightily, his praises hitherto unsung, to keep the
Realms alive and colorful. The throne at the center of the fray can oft be too warm a
place but the Archer sits it with dignity.
E.G.
To Steven E. Schend, for showing me around the City of Splendors.
J.R.K.
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Prelude

Rumination and Ruination

What a nuisance, death. No one's polite to a dead man... even if the departed is the Open Lord of Waterdeep.

A few manservants'd get the boot if Holy Tyr's justice had aught to say about it. They hoist me like a grainsack, drop me into coffins to check the fit, knock my head against any cornice or filigree that presents itself, leave me lying however I land, and never deign to straighten garments gathered at my knees or wadded up at my back.

On the second day of my demise, I was hung in the meat cellar with the rest of the perishables. Simon the stablehand happened along to pilfer some cheese, and took the opportunity to pose me provocatively with a three-foot-long Sembian sausage. If I hadn't once been a mischievous lad myself, I'd have him hanged like High Forest venison. If I'd not been mischievous... and weren't now as dead as Bane the Accursed.

I must be dead. Even Khelben thinks so. No breath. No pulse. Yet I can sense everything going on around me. I'm haunting my own corpse! Once it decays, perhaps my ghost will be able to move, haunting the entire Palace of Waterdeep. That would be considerably more interesting.

That is, if my body decays. I'm no mage, but I suspect the spell Khelben cast a tenday ago, bursts of brimstone and blue wildfire crawling all over my skin, somehow preserved me. That'd be just my luck. There's little fun in haunting a casket; no wonder ghosts get peevish.

Ah, here's proof of my suspicions: a dwarven smith. Hello, goodsir! Not that you can hear me. Your name, fellow? Hornbeak Goldglimmer? Hammerhead Nailwhacker? Dullasrocks Stinkbreath?

And what have you there? A set of measuring rods, a pair of fat-nibbed quills, and a rolled-up set

of plans for… for a glass-covered coffin? Lovely.
Get your thumb away from my eyes! Ge-aughh, darkness again!
That's the most frustrating thing about being dead. Whenever one of my eyelids shrinks back

enough to let me see what's going on, somebody slides them closed. They'll probably sew them
shut one of these days.
What good'll a glass-topped coffin be then?

Chapter 1

Death Comes for the Open Lord

Four young acolytes solemnly lit their tapers.

Piergeiron is dead. Khelben Blackstaff Arunsun, the Lord Mage of Waterdeep, sighed in defeat as
the trumpets, glauren, longhorns, and drums began their solemn dirge. It was chilly where he sat,
on a bench of polished marble in the balcony of the palace chapel. The stone was cold and hard
after the dark-stained wooden pews. The whole chapel had turned cold and hard. It had died
along with its lord.

I can scarce believe, after all these years, that he's truly gone.

Yet there he lay, in a gleaming casket of gold and glass, master-work by the best crafters in all
the Sword Coast. Cold and beautiful and dead. Sages said beauty and truth were the same thing.
If that was so, the Open Lord, arrayed in silks and wools, gold and gems, was beautifully and truly
dead.

Interesting, thought Khelben, watching four acolytes and four candles drift in stately procession up

the chapel aisle, that beauty and truth are so coldly meaningless without life.

Shaleen, so long dead and long mourned, lay in her own coffin beside her husband. The Lord Mage himself had exhumed and restored her body to beauty. Khelben Arunsun could make her whole and beautiful again, but without the aid and approval of Holy Mystra, he could not give her life. And with Shaleen, as with so many others, Mystra had given him only her holy silence. In the days and years to come, Piergeiron and his bride would lie side by side in the center of the chapel.

Khelben sighed again. His breath ghosted in the chill air, rising past fresh-painted plaster to disappear among polished ribs of white marble. Yes, the chapel was beautiful in its gold, silver, and limestone, aglow with bejeweled chandeliers. Its aisles lay like brushed snow under white carpets from Shou Lung, stretching past ranks of bleached oak panels, reaching up between each pillar to round windows of gem-studded stained glass. Once more, the Eye of Ao stared out in radiant perfection from the greatest window above the gathered throng. The artisans had done well. Damnably well.

Khelben had ordered the chapel refurbished to delay this funeral, the official proclamation of Piergeiron's death. It would take months, he'd thought, to haul away the cracked and fire-blackened pews, the sword-scarred panels of mahogany, the shards of shattered stained glass, bloodstained rugs and twisted, ruined lanterns. It would take longer still to replace them all. Until the chapel stood bright and complete once more, the Lord Mage could hold off the hordes of glint-toothed nobles and finger-cracking guildmasters

hoping to personally replace their dead Open Lord.

But here it was, a month hence, and the work was finished.

The nobles and guildmasters had done well… aye, damnably well.

They sat below, crowding the pews: nobles, guild-masters, magistrates, diplomats, secret lords and not-so-secret lords, senior guards: the best and brightest of Waterdeep. A gleaming, glittering forest of ermined shoulders, diamond necklines, high-coiffed hair, waxed mustaches, peacock feathers, whalebone stays, and features held just so by toning salves, minor magics, and even tiny clips and hidden strands of silk. The best and brightest.

Khelben had spent more than enough time among them to glimpse the monsters behind these masks.

Lasker Nesher was here, lord of an illicit logging empire. He was one of the most vocal contenders for the Open Lord's seat, stirring the rabble of Waterdeep with speeches that were half truth and all theater. Lasker had personally provided the bleached oak panels, rails, and bosses for the chapel "and other important palace rooms, out of love for the great Piergeiron." It was strange, indeed, that all the milled, polished wood came bearing inexpert spells of clairvoyance and clairaudience. Khelben hadn't removed the clumsy enchantments, but instead had overlaid them with spells that twisted all images and sounds into things menacing. Perhaps that's why the loving Lasker Nesher sat blinking between two new bodyguards, starched collar wilting against his clammy neck.

Then there were the Brothers Boarskyr. Loudly devastated by the disappearance of their kin Eidola of Neverwinter, the pair of oafs had used the misfortune as an excuse to move more or less permanently into the palace. While they awaited news of their cousin, they ravaged the palace

stores of beef, sweetmeats, pork, and venison, and drank aisle after aisle of Piergeiron's private wine cellar. Both gained another pound each day they remained. The Lord Mage had grudgingly provided enchanted saddles so the Boarskyrs wouldn't break the backs of any more palace horses.

Khelben wished he could send the two back to their rickety bridge and let it collapse beneath their combined enormity.

Plenty of other monsters sat in those pews, men and women as duplicitous and murderous as Eidola herself. Khelben was glad she hadn't returned and hoped she never would.

Not all the mourners here were monsters, the Lord Mage reminded himself. He watched a young boy light a candle flanking the raised dais where the caskets stood. Beside the boy hulked the man-giant Madieron Sunderstone, hair drooping in sorrow around his lowered face. Madieron had taken his master's death worse than most. As cheerful, powerful, and loyal as a sheepdog, Madieron had guarded Piergeiron from swords and shafts aplenty. But this last attack had been nothing he could fight, or, it seemed, even understand. The man had sat beside the gold and glass casket from the moment the Open Lord was interred there. Khelben wondered if, like a faithful guard dog, Sunderstone would sit beside it until he died of a

broken heart. If there was such a thing as a true heart, Madieron had one.

And what about Captain of the Guard Rulathon? The intense young man glared in amazed shame at the coffin. He had shouldered the whole burden of the recent troubles in Waterdeep, blaming himself for shapeshifters, the Unseen, and rampant conspiracies. It was clear the captain's honor would not recover from this blow—unless Piergeiron himself rose from the casket to forgive him.

The dwarven goldsmith had really outdone himself with those caskets. Their gold sheathings were elegant sculptures. At the four corners of the dais the smith had fashioned four tall golden candlesticks, overtopping the plainer rows of commoners' candles. Atop these man-high ornate gold giants, stout candles now sputtered to life, as the acolytes drew reverently back.

Where had the smith gotten all that gold on such short notice?

The candles suddenly flared, each blazing six feet high. In the sudden roar of light and heat, four menacing shapes formed… warriors! They leapt in flaming unison from their conflagrations, dropping to the floor in the midst of the astonished throng.

"Not again," hissed the Blackstaff. Scowling grimly, he rose from his bench, taking to the air with a gesture. Where wisps of nobles' breath had circled undisturbed in marble-vaulted air, the great, black-draped figure of Khelben now hung. Hung and then swooped, his sable cloak dragging unceremoniously across bald pates and careful coiffures. Mantled in swirling magic, he rushed down on the four warriors like a striking hawk.

In the discordant, dying fall of glauren and trumpets, half of Waterdeep heard him growl, "Don't

use gold from bewitched candlesticks!"

As though these words were a call to arms, the chapel burst into furious motion. Captain Rulathon and men of the Watch flooded up the aisles as the congregation recoiled from the caskets, streaming toward the doors. Many of the hurriedly departing had barely survived the first onslaught of fire warriors a month ago. That had been a wedding; who could guess what dread mayhem was coming to this funeral?

Into the chaos of charging Watchmen and cowering nobles Khelben descended, alighting in a whirl

of black cloth and magely fury just before the caskets.

A seasoned-looking warrior in gilded armor was the closest flame-borne intruder to the Lord Mage. His warhammer flashed out.

Lightning cracked from Khelben's fingertips. The weapon spun free of the warrior's hand and clanged, hissing and scorched, to the new carpets.

Another warrior—a scrappy-looking young fighter, this one—reached a hand for Khelben's throat, something bright and sharp swinging up beyond his shoulder for a fatal blow. There was a sound like broken, falling icicles, and the fighter froze. His hand hung rigid in the air, just shy of Khelben's throat.

The Lord Mage spared no glance for the stilled man. He was dodging the third warrior, a leather-garbed man hauling hard on a scourge. With a wave of wriggling fingers, Khelben awakened the gold filigree of Piergeiron's casket. Sculpted vines on its flanks came suddenly to life, whirling out to entrap the man in a tangle of living gold.

The fourth warrior, an olive-skinned rogue, was caught in the arms of Madieron, who'd roused

himself from his despair, face white with fury, to take a captive. The invader had gone slack in Sunderstone's grip, a sword dangling whitely to one side.

No, not a blade—an arm bone. The man's left arm was bare bones from the elbow down. The rest of him Khelben recognized.

Startled, he hissed the man's name aloud: "Artemis Entreri!"

Perhaps it was not the right thing to say in the presence of terrified nobles. Fresh shrieks came from the crowd, and they shied back with more frantic scramblings over pews, like cattle who've smelt the slaughterhouse maul.

Rulathon and the Watch surrounded the caskets and those who battled about them. Trained not to interfere with the Blackstaff, the Watchmen stood at the ready, trying to look menacing and capable.

Khelben drew in a deep breath. Black eyebrows bristled above steely eyes. He stared at the gold-armored warrior. "Kern?" The man stood stunned, shaking his lightning-struck hand.

The mage glanced next at the young fighter, frozen in place. "Noph?" With a wave of his hand Khelben dispelled the binding that held Noph and sent the golden vines retreating from the third man.

"Trandon?" It had been shackles, not a scourge, that Trandon had swung. "You certainly know how to make an entrance," Khelben growled, inwardly glad for any delay in the funeral. Their conversation, now that lightnings were not in play, seemed to have caught the attention of many mourners before they'd quite reached the doors. Damn them. "What are you doing here?" The Lord Mage's tone was irritable.

Noph's reply was equally blunt. "Just where exactly are we?"

"The Palace of Piergeiron Paladinson," snapped Khelben, "in the chapel. At the funeral of the Open Lord."

Noph swayed, and a sick look passed over his face. "We're too late then."

"We come from far Doegan," Kern put in, "from the company of paladins sent to rescue Eidola from her kidnappers. We've seen a king slain and a fiend war fought—"

"'Fiend war'?" gasped someone in the crowd. One rotund baroness staggered in a magnificent faint, flattening a knot of nobles behind her.

Khelben nodded. "I've sensed much, and suspected more—but reports are best given away from tender—and overeager—ears." He gestured for Kern and Noph to follow him, and for the Watch to bring Trandon and Entreri.

A snide voice rose above the excited whisperings of the crowd: "Hold, Lord Mage. This is just the sort of nonsense we've put up with for the past month."

Khelben did not trouble to hide his grimace. Lasker Nesher might have been Noph's father—but he had also become a one-man political pox on Waterdeep.

"You say the Open Lord is dead," Lasker said, looking to see that the crowd was listening, "and then that he isn't. You delay the funeral and meanwhile rule in the stead of the Paladinson. You know of fiend wars in the south—and the gods alone know what else—and tell not one of us, and now you seek to keep secret the first real report we have about Eidola of Neverwinter?"

The chapel had gone quiet save for the satiny echoes of Nesher's voice. Waterdeep listened

—intently.

"And who are we?" Nesher continued, his voice rising to become its own trumpet. "The lords and merchants, guildsmen and nobles of this fair city! We are the Magisters and the Watch, and all folk who've labored on at our posts though our bright leader is dead and a dread mageling has stepped in to hold power indefinitely. We're not 'tender ears.' We are the people! Piergeiron's people! The people of Waterdeep!"

There were shouts of agreement. Nesher's eyes flashed. "We have a right to know what's happening, not only in the back rooms of our palace or in the streets of our city, but in the lands all over our world!"

A general cheer rang out. "Do not spare us this news, Lord Mage: let the paladins tell their tale!"

Nesher has rallied them again, Khelben thought. No, duped is a better word. He has the power to lead them, cheering, off a cliff.

The Blackstaff halted Kern and Noph, gave them a half bow, and with a wave of his hand toward Nesher, said calmly, "A general report of your activities is requested." The metallic glare from beneath his brows made it clear the two had best be truthful but discreet.

The gathered eyes of Waterdeep turned to the golden paladin, the apparent hero of the hour.

It was Noph, though, who spoke first. "Well, we started right here in the palace: Kern, Miltiades, Jacob, Trandon, Aleena Paladinstar," he smiled in remembrance, "and a few others… Paladins, mostly, and me. We sought the fastest route to the Utter East, from whence, Khelben told us, Eidola's kidnappers had come. As it turned out, that route

was right under our feet." He stamped on the polished floor.

"In Undermountain," Kern explained, lifting a disapproving eyebrow at Noph's casual manner. "Ironically, this force of great virtue was led first to a city of great vice—wicked Skullport. 'Tis forever the burden of great men to confront and contend against the powers of darkness. Let evil know that, even to survive, it must forever wrestle great men—"

"Some women can pin evil right well, too—Aleena for one," Noph put in. There was laughter from the crowd.

Glowering, Kern continued, "In Undermountain, we lost the first of our men, Harloon, to the fell attack of an ettin—"

"Due to my own stupidity," Noph interjected, suddenly solemn.

"Continue," Khelben growled. "And one at a time." Noph took up the tale. "We found a portal to the Utter East," he said, "but it was crawling with fiends. We fought past most of them to reach it, but had the gods own bitter time trying to get the thing open as we fought one fiend after another. We opened it in the end. Aleena stayed behind to close it forever."

He glanced around the room, looking for the conspicuously absent lady paladin. A gentle blush crept from his collar. "I hoped we could see—I mean, I could… uh, that she'd made if out all right."

Impatiently, Kern brushed aside the younger man and continued. "We arrived in a land equally embattled by fiends, a realm clutched in the tyrannical

tentacles of King Aetheric III, Lord of the Bloodforge!"

The awed sensation he'd intended this pronouncement to evoke was destroyed by chortles over the accidental alliteration of "tyrannical tentacles."

Ruffled, the paladin snapped, "Aetheric was a twisted monstrosity, a giant whose lower body had been transformed by the bloodforge into the grasping tentacles of a squid."

No mirth followed this description. "The more he used the bloodforge to create armies," Kern said in tones of doom, "the more twisted he became, and the more fiends he drew to his land!"

Noph took up the story again. "You've Aetheric to thank for those shadow warriors who came here and busted up the place. They kidnapped Eidola. Aetheric sent them, figuring we'd send fleets of ships and armies of men to Doegan. He wanted to use them as fresh troops to fight his fiend war for him."

"Instead of sending great armies to rescue the bride of the Open Lord, though," Kern said with satisfaction, "we sent only a small company of paladins."

"We certainly showed him the depths of our regard," said Lasker Nesher, bitterly. The listeners dropped their heads, chastened that they'd valued Piergeiron's bride so little.

Kern snapped, "We chose a small strike team instead of an army because this crucial task required a small, delicate tool."

Khelben rolled his eyes. Kern's diplomacy was certainly no delicate tool. The eyes of the crowd turned from the golden warrior to a more ragged, common hero.

"Hosts of fiends overran the city," Noph said. "In the

fighting, King Aetheric broke free of his dark pool. He slithered to the top of his palace and fought there like a god from the Time of Troubles!

He killed friends in their thousands before he died from the fresh air—see, he breathed poisonous salt water, not air!"

He leaned forward in remembered excitement, and the crowd leaned with him. "With Aetheric dead," Noph added, "the city was helpless. Fiends were all over the place, while we were trapped in the dungeons of the palace. Worse yet, the bloodforge was unguarded!"

Kern gestured toward Entreri. "The assassin Artemis Entreri, scourge of Justice everywhere, was among those who tried to gain control of the foul forge, hoping, no doubt, to sell it to the highest bidder. Instead, the flesh of his left arm was scorched away, leaving only bare bone... a fitting punishment for ever-grasping avarice. Be warned, though: his fingers of bone are as deft as his fingers of flesh have ever been!"

In the silence that followed, Khelben thoughtfully stroked his black beard. "Where are the other paladins from your party? Dead? And where is Eidola?"

"Some are dead," Noph said regretfully. "Some are pursuing Eidola; we don't know where she's led them."

"'Led them'?" interrupted Lasker Nesher. He glared at his disowned son. "What nonsense is this? Since when does a kidnap victim run from her rescuers?"

Khelben's look was keen and level, his eyes testing Noph's response.

The young man rose to his father's challenge. "Not all of us were rescuers, Father. This assassin"—he gestured toward Entreri—"led a party of pirates, natives of the Utter East, to slay

Eidola. She knew folk were out to kill her. Of course she ran; you would have, too. In the confusion of a fiend war, it's easy enough to mistake a friend for a foe. I'm certain once Miltiades catches her, though, everything will be set right."

"Eidola is alive!" the Brothers Boarskyr shouted in gleeful unison. Becil, the more verbal of the two, waded forward through the mob, his half-wit brother capering in his wake. "Which means she's inheritable to the Throne of King Pallidson!" he roared, "And we're her most conjugal relations, now that the king's reclining in the slumberous arms of the bucket he just kicked…"

Khelben shook his head, motioning them to silence.

The gesture was too subtle for the likes of Becil and Bullard.

"… And if she's become mortified of late, due to the felicitous aptitudes of eternal wherewithal and so forth, the throne is destined to languish beneath our collective posteriors into perpetuous posterity—"

"First," Khelben roared, "Piergeiron is not king, but Open Lord. Second, he has no throne. And third, the funerary rites are not completed, and therefore he is not officially dead. As for Eidola, she was never officially married to the Open Lord, and even if she were, the office of Open Lord is not hereditary—and even if it were, it wouldn't be passed to shirttail relations!"

Blinking at the volume and fury of this sudden outburst, Becil and Bullard glanced down at their

shirt-tails, which flapped about their waists, and tucked them before striding on.

"Well," Becil returned smoothly, "we are entitled to certain entitlements due to the titular title of

our cousin as regards her impending matrimony to this impending deadman, especially if she herself is found to be in a status symbol wanting of breath and other indications of livingness."

It was not Khelben's breath that was steaming now. "I'm under the impression your quarters this last month were more than lavish," he said almost silkily, "to say nothing of the food and drink granted you. Now I've rather more appropriate accommodations in mind. Captain Rulathon, I believe you're well acquainted with the fine facilities in the deepest parts of the palace?"

The watch captain nodded happily, hooking an arm through Becil's. "Come with me, sir. You'll get everything coming to you."

Bullard crowded forward, hand reaching toward Rulathon's belt. "How's about I've a look at your sword, hey?"

The response was immediate. Four Watchmen intervened with such speed that even Bullard was unaware exactly when and how he was knocked cold. This event also passed the notice of Becil, along with most of the crowd, since unconsciousness did not dramatically change Bullard's intellectual carriage.

As the two numbskulls (one quite literally) were assisted in their departure, the mood of the crowd grew dark. Waterdeep had been through a lot in the past month. If the Open Lord's bride wasn't safe in Piergeiron's Palace on her wedding day, no one was safe anywhere. There'd been talk of dopplegangers, guild conspirators, shadow warriors, assassins, pirates, and squid lords—and not just talk. All of these villains were involved in recent troubles, but none were the greatest, deepest threat. So what then? If these were only surface distractions,

what dastardly foes lurked behind them all?

Guilds had closed their doors. Merchants had hired muscle. Guards were ordered to kill first and let the resurrection men ask questions later. Disaffected young nobles spoke fashionably of ending their lives, though none yet had.

The city cowered beneath an occupying army, invisible and unnamed. Unseen foes were poised to pillage, slaughter, and burn. And while Waterdeep lay at the mercy of these foes, her leader lay at the mercy of death itself. In his stead ruled a secretive, ill-tempered archmage known to have dabbled in every wicked thing to happen since the Godswar—and during that darkest of times,, and before! A ruler not elected or appointed, though no one had yet quite dared to point this out to him.

Now, at long last, here was a foe one could see. Artemis Entreri. An assassin! More than that—an assassin sent to slay Eidola! An avaricious butcher, who turned from his bloody task to capture a weapon of unspeakable evil. A man whose hand and arm were now skeletal—half man, half monster!

At last, here was a face to despise and spit upon, a body to gibbet and display on the gates of the city he'd so terrorized. It didn't matter that he hadn't killed Eidola, nor that he hadn't been involved in any crimes in Waterdeep itself. When a scapegoat is sought, anything with small white horns and a goatee will do.

It was Lasker Nesher who gave voice to this long-pent fury. He climbed atop a bench, clutched the lapels of his mourning coat, and drew in a deep breath. All

eyes turned to him—and when he spoke, his voice boiled forth with all the ferocity of steam escaping a vat of boiling acid.

"So here is one of our tormentors!" He flung his hand down to point at the assassin. Many in the crowd leaned and peered to see the dangling form. "Here is a man in league with monsters. Here is a man who thinks he can hold a whole city hostage. And not just a city. The city! Waterdeep. Jewel of the North—greatest jewel of all Faerûn!"

The roar of response was immediate and explosive.

"Are we not Waterdhavians? Are we not Waterdeep?"

The cheers were edged in anger. "Look at us all. We are of Waterdeep: nobles, merchants and guildsmen, freemen and servants! We are the arms and minds and voice of all Waterdeep!"

Nesher turned slowly to gather all eyes before his hand swept down to point again. "Here are the Watch and armsmen of the Guard, charged with protecting us all from enemies within or without. What say you: is this assassin friend or enemy?"

From the armsmen scattered through the crowd came a ragged consensus, "Enemy. Aye, a foe."

"And here are the Magisters, charged with trying, convicting, and sentencing those accused of attacking the folk of Waterdeep. What say you, Magisters? Is this man a menace to us?"

Again, the grudging reply, "Aye."

Nesher grinned, victory gleaming in his eyes. "And here is the Open Lord, the one man in all Waterdeep who alone holds the power to commute a sentence. What say you, Piergeiron Paladinson? Speak, if you would commute the sentence of death laid upon this man!"

The Open Lord was silent in his casket of glass.

After a tense moment of waiting, hoping somehow that the still form of the paladin would rise and speak, the crowd shouted its support.

Lasker Nesher cried out, "Guards, bear this man to the dungeon to await hanging, drawing, and quartering at the break of day!"

Into the roar that followed, Khelben cried, "When did the jewel of Faerûn come to be run by mob justice?"

Nesher rounded on him, eyes smug in his deceitful face. "You're not Open Lord, mage. As you yourself contend, Piergeiron remains Open Lord until declared dead. Until then, only he can commute the sentence of the Magisters!"

He pointed to Trandon, who had stood silently chained though it all. "And what; of this other one?" he cried hungrily. "What is his crime?"

Noph and Kern traded reluctant glances.

"Tell us," Nesher commanded. "Tell the people of Waterdeep, or face their judgment yourselves!"

"He posed as a paladin, that's all," Noph said. "Though he's as worthy of the title as I am."

"'Posed as a paladin'?" crowed Nesher. "What is he really?"

When neither Noph or Kern would elaborate, Trandon himself said, "I'm a wizard. A War Wizard."

"A spy!" shouted Nesher. "A Cormyrean spy. An agent of Azoun in our midst. Treason! Let him die with the assassin. All in favor?"

The restored chapel—white marble, bleached oak, glowing gold, and all—shook with the thunderous voice of the mob. "Aye!"

"Away with them both! And in the morning, let us cheer again when their bodies are riven and piked in our midst!"

It seemed that only Khelben, Kern, and Noph did not cheer.

Chapter 2
A Trial for Noph

The dungeon bustled that evening. Watchmen in plenty paced beneath ceilings dripping with fungus, condensation beaded across their shoulder plates. Lantern light flickered across gritted teeth. Aside from the pad of leather soles on wet floors, though, silence reigned.

The center two cells held prisoners—men slated to die in the morning. Cells across a corridor from each other, watched over by two dozen restless armsmen… and one young man just returned from Doegan. Noph had volunteered for guard duty, hoping to meet Khelben and plead for the prisoners' lives.

Where was the Lord Mage? He was supposed to seal the cells with warding magic.

Noph leaned against the wall beside Entreri's cell, thoughts racing. He remembered this dungeon; he'd been imprisoned here. He'd stared at these very stones for the better part of an evening. His fingers had traced their shapes as he'd imagined their origins. Mined from black bedrock, lifted into the glaring sun, sawed and sliced into unnatural blocks with unforgiving edges, hauled down into another pit, stacked, mortared, compressed, compelled into walls designed to hold living flesh until it died, if need be. Something similar had happened to him. It had begun a month ago, on the wedding night, when Noph had stayed in this very cell and been called "assassin."

Noph peered again through the bars of Entreri's cell. The small man was still sprawled motionless on a pile of old straw; a man he'd once followed, once wanted to emulate. An assassin.

Was a man an assassin when he sought to kill a shapeshifting monster? That's what Eidola was, after all. Of course, Entreri hadn't known that. He'd have tried to kill her even if she'd been Piergeiron's true bride. Was a man an assassin when he didn't kill the person he'd intended to?

How could Waterdeep execute a man for not assassinating someone? How could it be justice when a man was tried and convicted by a mob? Was it enough that Entreri was known to be an assassin? Should a man be executed on the basis of his reputation?

And what of Trandon? He'd fought bravely. He'd faced down death, and been a loyal trail companion. What did it matter if he fought for Waterdeep or Cormyr? He'd risked his life. And what had his grit and courage won him? Execution?

What does grit and courage get anyone? Noph wondered sourly.

"Ah, there you are," a snide voice said, down the corridor. Lasker Nesher approached, proud self-satisfaction oozing from his wet smile. "I almost said, "There you are, Son," but of course you aren't my son anymore."

"A fact that pleases us both," Noph replied coolly, as his father stopped before him. The man settled into place like a post sinking into a hole, about a handspan too close to Noph, who could not back up with the wall at his back. He raised his head as if flinging off rain, and asked briskly, "What brings you here, Lord Nesher? Or is it Open Lord Nesher yet?"

Hunger crawled across the noble's face, avarice he did not trouble to conceal. "Not yet. But you heard how the people respond to me."

Noph did not quite smile. "Wait till they get to know you."

Lasker ignored this, choosing instead to smooth back an errant strand of his thinning hair. "I come with a proposition for you. Isn't there somewhere more private we can talk?"

"A couple of cells around the corner stand empty. You'll feel right at home."

The noble blinked at this sally, measuring his son, and then came to some sort of decision. "We've much to discuss," he said in an almost pleading tone. "Come, grant your father one audience?"

Noph nodded despite himself. No matter how despicable and grasping Lasker's deeds, he thought, the man was still his father.

Lasker led the way, small and fidgety, muttering along the line of lanterns. Noph, catching fragments here and there, realized his parent was rehearsing the speech he was about to give. A ragged string hung from the older man's coat, waggling behind him like some sort of limp tail. Noph watched it droop.

They rounded a corner. In the shadows cast by distant, flickering lantern light, the door of one cell stood ajar, three inches of solid oak banded with oiled iron. Dust swirled up behind Noph's and Lasker's boots—no, not dust. Ash.

The walls, ceiling, and floor of the cell were coated with soot, and two perfect cones of ash stood like sentinels at its far end. Above, the back wall sloped down, gnarled and ancient bedrock that seemed like a giant hand pressing the space closed.

Lasker turned. "Let's get to business. You've no doubt recognized that I've changed since you left. My influence expands; I'm seeking high public office at last. You said I'd be at home in this cell.

Well, if things run according to plan, not only this cell but this whole palace will be mine."

"You've been busy," Noph noted noncommittally.

A light kindled in Lasker's eyes. "I've won the support of ten merchants and three guilds. I've made speeches in every public square that matters. You heard me this afternoon! And unbeknownst to my rivals, I've struck an agreement with the Brothers Boarskyr: I'll get my bridge, and they'll get free High Forest lumber for ten years. Once the elves know what's hit them, the Kara-Turan trade route'll be open, with the weight of all Waterdeep behind the deal! D'you see? I've accomplished in one month what Piergeiron couldn't in a whole year!"

With a calmness he no longer felt, Noph asked, "What does this have to do with me?"

"I want to share it all with you," Lasker hissed, waving a clenched fist. "You are, after all, my son and my heir! I want you at my side. We'd be an irresistible pair: powerful merchant and young hero. Your presence would ensure power and fortune for our family."

Noph nodded. "You've all the underhanded expertise, and I the honest face people trust," he snorted. "In case you haven't noticed, Father, I've changed over the past month, too. I've traveled farther than you have in your whole life; I've been where there are no shadows at midday because the sun is right overhead. I've fought dopplegangers and squid lords, creatures that make your brand of evil as squalid as it is chronic. I've drunk with pirates and crossed swords with tanar'ri, and returned to tell of it. You said it yourself: I'm a hero. Why would a hero ever join you?"

Lasker's mouth set. "So, you've saved all Waterdeep from a plague of monsters and conjured armies. Congratulations." He sketched a mock bow. "What has it gotten you? The dungeons, serving common guard duty! Where's your estate? Your riches? Your influence? You saved all Waterdeep but own none of it!" The merchant waved a dismissive hand.

"With me," he said, the light in his eyes again, "you'll have all those things. Come back to the family. All it'll take is a public apology, asking to be received back."

"What?" Noph asked, astonished.

"You publicly humiliated the house of Nesher," his father explained, "and you will publicly remove

that humiliation."

"I wouldn't join you," Noph said slowly, "even if you apologized to me—and not only to me, but to

all of Waterdeep!"

As the young hero's last few shouted words echoed around them, his father's face grew sour. "My son, the great, self-righteous hero!" He sighed contemptuously, and then asked, "What good is it to be a hero if you lack any plan to make the public pay you benefits for your heroism? Eh?"

Noph shook his head. How could a man—and not just any man; his father!—be this base? Wasn't—

"If I might ejaculate something between you—" a voice rumbled from nearby.

Noph had thought this end of the dungeon was empty. He looked through the open doorway at the cell across the corridor. Jostling at its bars were the unlovely faces of the Brothers Boarskyr.

Noph sighed. "Father, I believe your partners in cri—politics—have something to add."
"Thank you positively, young Hastacough," Becil Boarskyr bellowed, clearing his throat.
"Kastonoph."
"Right, Kastratoff. Listen well to your father's patronizing speech. Your sire's only trying to become
a sire with a capital's', if you know what I'm hinting at around the bush. That would make you a
sire with a lowly V at first, but soon enough, once your sire kicks off, he'll leave it in your
posterior."
"Posterity," Lasker attempted a correction.
"How's about I have a look at your sword?" Bullard asked.
"This is a private conversation," Noph said flatly.
"Not to fiddle about with another man's privates," replied Becil, "but our enterprise has got its
smarmy speaker (that's your progenital pater, there beside you), and two liberaltarian spenddrifts
(that's ours truly), and now all we need is a hero's face to kiss the babies and shake the hands of
men and ply his silvered tongue in every passing lady's behalf—"
"Arrgh! It's useless!" Lasker screamed, tossing his hands into the air and stalking away down the
corridor.
Noph smiled at the two idiots. "I never thought I'd say this to you, but… thanks."
Bullard nodded. "I never thought I'd say this, neither, but how's about a look at your sword?"
The younger and elder scions of House Nesher had scarce turned a corner in search of a cell
when there was a great rush of black wool and imperious gestures along the passage. The
whirlwind resolved itself into Khelben the Blackstaff even before the armsmen got their weapons

out. A raised magely eyebrow sent the few drawn weapons hastily back into their sheaths.

"Gather round, all of you," he said. "Aye, those in the jakes, too."

The dungeon was suddenly alive with shuffling feet and nervously attentive armsmen crowding around the mage.

Khelben looked around. "Is that all of you, at last? Good. The spells I'm about to cast on you are complex and costly; I don't want to have to repeat a single one of them."

A final guard rushed up to join the group, hands darting beneath his belt where shirttails flapped.

Khelben gave him a glare, and then turned his head to favor all of the other armsmen with it. "Any of you been under a stoneskin spell before?" There were a few nods. "'Tis pretty simple; makes your skin as tough as stone. It'll turn arrows, daggers, swords, and the like. It should keep you from hurting each other down here tonight. I'm casting it now."

In the silence that followed, the armsmen stared at a small pebble rolling hypnotically between Khelben's fingers as the wizard shaped gestures in the air. With a sudden pop and a hiss, the stone collapsed into gray ash, and tracers of smoke whirled out from the mage's fingers to smite each guard between the eyes.

The silence held until Khelben spoke again. "This second enchantment will enable you to fight as a unit, for once." Khelben made two quick gestures, uttering a word that sounded both old and cruel. "You'll share an only slightly unpleasant dream, but in the end, you get to be heroes."

Twenty-some guards stared back at him in silent confusion.

Khelben saw their expressions, shrugged, and made another gesture. "You needn't be upset by any of this. In fact, you'll forget all about our little conversation—and that I was even here. I'm completely invisible to you until highsun tomorrow. You can't even remember my name until then. If you see me before that time, you see nothing at all. Understand?"

Helmed heads nodded in unison, and Khelben smiled grimly. "Back to work!" he barked. "You've a pair of condemned men to guard!"

* * * * *

Midnight was fast approaching, yet still no Lord Mage. Noph sat alone on a bench well down the passage from the cells. Only five hours remained before sunrise and a double execution. Where was the Blackstaff?

For that matter, what good would his warding magics be now? If Entreri and Trandon hadn't tried to escape yet, they wouldn't.

"'Ware!" a Watchman shouted. Noph blinked. A gangly, redheaded armsman stood outside Entreri's cell, struggling to free his sword from its scabbard. "The assassin's loose! He's picked the lock with his fingerbones!"

Boots pounded on flagstones. Noph joined the general rush. Armored shoulders and helmed heads jostled in the passage ahead. Blades slid and rang from their sheaths, glinting in the lantern light. Noph shouldered forward through the press of guards, peering to see what was happening by the cells.

The redheaded guard's sword grated out at last, aided by a muttered curse. Its owner promptly lunged at the cell door, thrusting the blade between its bars to the hilt. If Entreri were there, he'd

be skewered. The guard's hand, arm, and shoulder—suddenly thinner than they should be—followed his sword through the window. Steel clanged on stone. The guard hissed in pain and snatched his arm back into view. The sword was no longer in it.

"He bit me," the armsman growled, clutching his wrist.

"Now he's got a blade, dolt!" someone shouted. The hurrying guards reached the cell door, and stopped suddenly, those in front shrinking back from something Noph couldn't see. He charged on into his packed fellows. There were stumbles, grunts, and the skirl of metal-clad elbows and knuckles on unyielding stone. Struggling to keep his footing, Noph peered ahead.

A strange fight was in progress. The gangly guard ducked as if a sword swept the air above his head, but Noph saw no blade nor attacker. Springing desperately aside, the red-haired armsman barreled into two other guards, and all three sprawled along the passage wall.

A lithe guard leapt over this pile of armsmen to the cell door, his sword dancing in intricate thrusts and parries before him. "Clever with a blade, Entreri?" the guard taunted. "Aren't you more familiar with dagger thrusts into kidneys from behind?" He lunged twice more before dodging away from an unseen blow.

Something massive and invisible slammed into the guard's head with a sickeningly damp crack. He toppled like a piece of lumber, stiff and uncaring.

"Watch that door!" someone shouted. "He's killed a man with a door!"

"Watch that sword!" another guard snarled.

"Watch that bony hand!"

"Back! Back! Give me room to fight!" bellowed a hulking guard at the head of the crowd. He swung a spiky mace once, twice, and then with a roar he charged, seeming to think he was backing someone up against the wall. Noph could see no one. The giant swung his mace, growling, and then yelped and stumbled back, trampling two men behind him.

"Fire! Fire! He'll burn us all!"

"Water! Bring water!"

"Not water, for an oil fire! Bring sand!"

"Damned lanterns! What was wrong with good old torches, I'd like to know?"

Ahead of Noph, the guards were jammed solidly, metal shoulders shrieking against each other. Those in front flung up their hands before their eyes as if shielding themselves from blinding light, yet the passage stood as dim as before. There was no smoke, heat, or light—no fire.

Noph struggled to squeeze through the packed ranks, hauling on shoulders and crying, "Way! Make way!"

"Let him through," one guard cried. "He's got sand!"

"Hurry, Noph!" another called. "Entreri's almost got the sorcerer's cell open!"

Noph at last won free of the press of bodies, stumbling out into the clear area before the cells. "What're you doing? You'll burn alive!" came a shout from behind him. Noph ignored it, striding straight to Entreri's cell. Its door was closed and locked, and within the assassin still lay unconscious on the straw. Noph peered through the window of Trandon's cell. The sorcerer stood just inside the bars, gazing quizzically out at him.

Noph turned to the other guards. "What's the matter with all of you?"
"Get out of there, Noph—save yourself! They can't get past us all!"
"You're right," Noph replied, bewildered. "They're still in their—"
A new commotion erupted. The three nearest guards, in the front rank, swung their swords at
empty air, faces tense and blades whistling. Steel fangs sliced and thrust, but met no enemy
metal. The three battling guards grunted with effort, shouting, "Back to your cell, assassin!"
"You can't defeat all three of us!"
"If you want out of this dungeon, you'll have to kill me fir—Aughh! Cruel stroke!" The speaker's
sword clattered to the stones. Clapping a hand to his neck, he crashed heavily into the wall. "Oh,
unkind cut," he gasped, and slowly brought his fingers back to gaze at them in magnificent pathos.
They were none too clean, Noph saw, but bare.
"Blood so bright," the guard groaned. "My blood! To be shed, if shed it I must, in bright meadows,
not in a dungeon drear. Ahhh, I am slain… Oh, to die so deep and dark…"
As the 'slain' man declaimed, his two fellows fought all the harder. Sweat streamed down their
faces as they plied their blades, but Noph could still see and hear no foe. He went to them, taking
care to stay out of sword range. "Who are you fighting?"
"Stab him from behind, Noph!"
"Stab who from behind?"
"We've got him trapped between us!"
"I see no one," Noph told them. "You're battling some sort of illusion."
"… Oh, the dusky shore," the guard against the wall moaned. "Swept by winds of sorrow,

heedless beneath the feet of those who pass, forgotten by the living. I come to you now,
Kelemvor, Lord of the Dead, borne upon the dark tides of mine own lifeblood…"
"You're not dying," Noph said in disgust. "You're not even hurt!"
"Slay him, Noph! Strike now, while his sword is bound by mine!"
"Too late! 'Ware the fell mage!"
"Thunder and lightning!"
"Fireballs—they burst so bright! 'Ware more magic!"

"How can we stand against this?"

"Gods take your wits!" Noph shouted. "Nobody's attacking you!"

"… at least they'll say of me: he died defending great Waterdeep. Died fighting valiantly, brought
low by the vicious blade of a dastardly man. The bards will sing, down the years, of my
all-too-rapid end…"

At last the jammed armsmen were on the move. Those at the rear retreated, white-faced and
flinching. Those in the middle flailed about, tumbling with each imagined blast of arcane fire or
sorcerous lightning.

Those in the fore slumped down in faints or succumbed to illusory injuries. Noph stood in the
center of the supposed conflagration, and shook his head in amazement. At his feet a guard
gasped, "I'm coming, Mamma, at last. This is it."

Noph stalked to Trandon's cell. The tall mage stood within, innocent amusement on his features.
"All right, Trandon," Noph said sourly, "Is this your mass delusion spell?"

Trandon shook his head. "I wish it were, but this sort of magic is beyond me. Moreover, if you can

tear your attention away from all these wretched thespians, you might notice I am still locked up."

"Well," Noph growled, looking at Entreri still unconscious on his straw, "it's sorcery from somewhere."

Trailing shouts, groans, and threats, the battle was retreating down the passage, leaving only Noph to watch the prisoners. The young hero looked from the battling guards to one cell, and then to the other, and let out a sigh.

As if the exhalation had been a cue, a figure in flapping black robes surged around the corner. Noph whirled, sword coming up. "Halt!"

Khelben Arunsun looked up at the sword tip. The tune he'd been humming stopped abruptly, and his mustache quirked in surprise. "Kastonoph! What are you doing here?"

Noph lowered his sword. "Lord Mage, thank the gods you've come! Someone's enchanted the whole garrison! I'm the only one not affected. They're down there; they think they're fighting Entreri and Trandon, though as you can see..." He gestured at the closed cell doors.

"Yes," the archmage agreed, keys jangling as he raised them from his belt. "Worry not about the guardsmen. None will be truly injured. They'll fight bravely, and the spy and the assassin will be slain. No offense, Trandon."

"None taken," the tall mage replied levelly.

"Slain?" Noph asked.

"Fireball. These underways and cells are too small for fireballs, especially the augmented one you'll cast, Trandon. It backfires on you, burning you and Entreri to piles of ash." Khelben fitted a key to the lock on the wizard's door, turned it, and swung it wide,

adding, "You really must be more careful."

"It won't happen again," Trandon said calmly, stepping from the cell.

Noph raised his sword. "Wait—what's this?"

Khelben raised an eyebrow. "A jailbreak."

The sword flashed from one mage to the other, and back again. "I can't allow that," Noph snapped. "I'm the only guard left, and I'm sworn to keep these prisoners in their cells until dawn. Back in with you, Trandon!"

"Oh, come now, Noph." Khelben's voice was almost paternal. "He doesn't deserve to die in the morning, does he?"

"No, I was going to talk to you about that. But a jailbreak?"

"Desperate times, lad; d'you honestly believe he'll get justice from the Magisters and Watch, come morning?"

"No, but… you're the Lord Mage. You're supposed to protect Waterdeep, to serve the city loyally. And I'm supposedly one of the heroes of Doegan. Some hero I'll be if I let Trandon just slip away."

Khelben looked grim. He pushed aside Noph's sword to lay a hand on the young man's shoulder. "In the end, Kastonoph, the true hero is not someone who clings blindly to what he's decided is true, but someone who, despite a thousand assaults and the uncertainty of standing in the midst of chaos, acts always to help rather than to hurt. Real heroes are not hidebound moralists seeking always to be righteous. True heroes are committed pragmatists who do what must be done for the good of all. Unless you release this man now, you—

knowing what you do of his innocence and Waterdeep's judgment—will be his murderer."

Silence fell. Noph's gaze swung thoughtfully from his blade to one motionless mage, then to the other, and back. Eventually he lowered his blade and sheathed it, bowing to Trandon. Slowly he said, "It has been an honor fighting beside you."

"I feel a similar honor," replied the mage, "to have fought at your side."

"Good, then," Khelben said briskly, sliding a key into the lock of Entreri's cell.

Noph's head snapped around. "Him, too? I don't know if it's right he should die, but... he is an assassin, and he did plan to kill Eidola."

Khelben turned the key. The lock clicked. He swung the door open and stepped into the cell, shrugging. "Yes and yes, but I thought it would be bad form to let him die, given that I'm the one who hired him."

"You? You hired him to kill Eidola?"

"She is a greater doppelganger," Khelben murmured as he bent over the assassin, "or didn't you know that?"

For a moment, it was all Noph could do to yammer incoherently. "You mean you knew? You? You knew who—what—she was before sending us out to get her back? That she wasn't a helpless

maiden but an evil monster?" His voice was as high and shrill as a hurt child's. Noph lowered it an octave and asked accusingly, "You risked all our lives sending us to rescue a monster?"

"I was hoping Entreri would reach her before you did." Khelben looked gravely at the unconscious man. "He's near death, but I know a priest who can make

him whole—even restore his arm. That was part of our agreement: no death or lasting injuries."

The Lord Mage scooped up Entreri in his arms and carried him to the door. "This whole business of Eidola worked out," he told Noph as he shouldered through the cell doorway. "You figured out what she was. You survived. And you're a hero now."

Feeling puzzled and deceived, Waterdeep's hero followed the archmage into the passage and came to a halt as the Lord Mage mounted the stairs with his burden, Trandon of Cormyr on his heels. "I don't feel like a hero!" Noph shouted after them. "I feel like a gods-damned traitor!"

The Lord Mage did not even turn as he replied, "It's a common complaint among true heroes."

Interlude

Dream and Delirium

At first I was pleased to discover that dead men dream. What other diversion is there for a soul haunting its own everlasting corpse? It provides some respite from a humdrum existence of lying about in cold cellars, counting each new mote of dust as it, with excruciating deliberation, settles out of the air and onto one's nose.

In place of the palace cellar, there is a deep wood: tall, ancient trees like columns, pierced betimes by long, slanting banners of light. There is a deep pool, still and clear, where fish lurk and

drift in silvery silence and cold. There is the green and unmistakable smell of verdant life.

What better place to spend the off-hours of afterlife?

So I thought.

Until I heard the long, distant, beautiful, mourning song of the white dove, lost beyond the pool

and forest and marching mountains. Until it drew me, and I knew it was the plaintive cry of my irrecoverable love. Until I realized this was not, perhaps, a dream, but the haunted lands of the dead, the places where souls ever pursue and never catch what they have lost.

It is better by far to count the settling dust.

Chapter 3

Death Comes Again for the Open Lord

It was funeral time. The trumpets, glauren and longhorns wailed their dirge, embroidered by the heartrending cries of mourners, both private and professional. The restored chapel gleamed in newness and teemed with dignitaries, every corner crammed with close-packed citizens.

Khelben sat on the same balcony bench as before. Madieron Sunderstone once again slumped like a sheep dog beside the glass-topped casket. Captain Rulathon occupied the same place of honor from which, by gestures and secret signs, he commanded the gathered Watchmen. Nothing had changed, despite the return of two warriors from the Utter East, the attempted escape and subsequent death of two traitors, and the report that Eidola had not yet been rescued. Nothing save golden baskets filled with flowers, resplendent where gold candlesticks enspelled by the Doegan bloodforge had been neatly sawed away.

Unfortunately, no one had told the acolytes. They were only paces away from the caskets when they realized there were no candles to light. The first of the four boys, a freckled redhead who looked at once impish and solemn in his flowing white robe, paused only a moment before continuing to his corner of the funeral dais. There, as his

companions found their places, he discreetly pawed among the flowers, seeking a holder for his taper. The black-haired acolyte across from him took the motion to mean that they were supposed to light the flowers. This was harder than one might suspect, since the white sunroods and merestars were still dewy from the morning mist. He succeeded only in getting a wisp of black smoke to curl up from one sprig of fern.

The last two boys, blond twins and kin to Madieron, had by simultaneous inspiration begun dribbling wax onto the glass casket preparatory to sticking their candles to it. Piergeiron's grieving bodyguard sat within easy reach of both, but was too lost in sorrow to take notice. It wasn't until the red wax of one of their perched candles snaked down beside Madieron's face—cooling just fast enough to trap a lock of his hair against the glass—that the man lifted his head. His scalp lost the sudden tug of war for the lock of hair. He growled something to the boys, and his great armspan allowed him to deliver simultaneous cuffs to their heads.

It was at that moment, of course, that the dirge ended. In the sudden echoing hush, the private protests of the twins became all too public. "When we tell Mamma—"

Awe brought them to silence as a white-robed priest of Ao drifted across the dais, hands spread in benevolent greeting. A grim expression of collective sorrow and solemnity filled his fleshy face. Reflected candlelight glowed from his bald pate. He reached the front of the dais and halted, his raiment swaying magnificently around him.

"Come, ye mighty! Come, ye small! Come all peoples, elf and human, dwarf, halfling, and gnome!
Come to gather and behold! Behold what grim truth is upon us!" The priest gestured at the two
bodies lying in state before him. His eyes lit on the canted candles stuck to the glass, but his voice
rolled on steadily, "Behold the end for us all!"

The priest gestured with both arms, tragedy leaking grandly into his voice. "See that heart, large
enough to hold whole realms in its compass, large enough to seat the soul of this immeasurable
man! Now it holds neither lands nor souls nor even blood, but nothing at all. And that breast,
broad enough to breathe life into all the world, languishes now in eternal rest. Without him Faerûn
suffocates."

The acolytes were glaring uncomfortably at the Open Lord's chest. Why is it that if you stare at a
dead body hard enough, it looks like it's breathing?

"See those fingers lying in repose, fingers that wielded pens and grasped swords, firm and sure
digits of flesh and blood that cast down walls and lifted up children. See them now, still as stone."

The eyes of the congregation shifted to those folded hands. Perhaps it was the dance and play of
candlelight atop the glass, or the vivid words of the priest, but more than a few watchers thought
they saw fingers "still as stone" twitch. A silent thrill shivered through the crowd.

Halting in momentary fear, the priest recovered and went on. "See those very eyes that were
wont to gaze upon vast Waterdeep in all its splendor, and the Sword Coast beyond, that look now
down the halls of. eternal memory, as they shall forever more!"

A crease became visible across the eyelids, as if the corpse strained to draw them open. Were it not for the delicate stitchery of the funerary priests, the Open Lord might have, it almost seemed, gazed back at the crowd gathered to honor his passing.

"Our friend, our comrade, our leader..." The priest of Ao let his grand words roll down the chapel, casting an uncertain glance at the lord's casket once more. "Our Piergeiron Paladinson, the Open Lord of Waterdeep, at last is dead."

He hung his head, and the congregation hung theirs with him, looking up as the white-robed priest lifted his voice with fresh energy. "Consider his mouth, which once proclaimed law and justice to we, his people! Lips which once opened in acceptance of this woman, Shaleen, as his bride. A mouth that will nevermore open again, to guide and reass—"

Said mouth suddenly opened in a roar of terror and loss that, albeit muffled by air-tight glass, shook the chapel to its foundations. "No!"

Piergeiron's corpse sat up, whacking its head against the glass. The Open Lord fell back only momentarily onto the richly embroidered velvet before lifting those still-as-stone hands to punch awkwardly at the curved glass confining him.

"Truly he is dead!" the priest shouted, stumbling back from the horrific sight. He repeated his declaration loudly, as if hoping to convince the corpse of its demise. "Truly he is dead!"

"Truly he is alive!" someone bellowed from the balcony.

Heads snapped up, but the balcony no longer held he who'd spoken. Once more Khelben "Blackstaff" Arunsun was sailing above the heads of the cringing congregation in a flurry of black wool. Someone shrieked.

Khelben descended like a magnificent storm cloud, huge and unstoppable. Lightning seemed to dash from his furious brows. "Fools! Piergeiron lives! Open the coffin! Bring pry bars, augers and saws! Where are the crafters? Bring them here! Open that coffin!"

Khelben landed beside Madieron. The man-giant's fists were crashing like twin hammers on the glass of the Open Lord's casket; it boomed like a thunderous war drum. Piergeiron's own fists were answering, blow for blow, from within the case.

"It's no good!" Khelben shouted to Madieron, peeling the grieving giant back from the coffin by main strength. "Yon glass is hard as diamonds—impenetrable! We've got to pop the bolts!"

Craftsmen were scurrying up the aisle now, their rugged wooden toolboxes odd against the ceremonial garb they'd been given for the funeral. Horns sounded as Watch officers summoned men to run far and fast in search of tools, all the tools that could be found in the ward and beyond!

"How many bolts are there?" Khelben snarled, his eyes fairly spitting sparks.

"Fifteen hundred," a smith gulped, looking away from that fiery gaze.

"Well, drill, man! Air holes—hurry!"

As men crouched beside the coffin and lifted their tools to the task, Madieron let out a howl of

despair and hammered the glass again.

"Stop!" Khelben shouted. "Give them room! You'd have to weigh ten times as much as you do to have a chance of breaking through."

Madieron stared for a frustrated moment at the mage, tears standing in his eyes. Then he let out

a roar that rang around the chapel, and rushed off through the stunned crowd.

Pry bars bit along the side of the casket. Men groaned, and metal creaked. A golden bolt popped,
and then another. Men and dwarves crawled forward on their elbows under those wielding the
bars, to crank large drills hard and as fast. Curls of gold sheered away from whirling bits and fell.
Sweat beaded hands and foreheads. More bolts popped. Auger bits gnawed and dug.

All the while that hands gripped and wrenched at the outside of the casket, the Open Lord's hands
pounded against the inside. His breath had quickly frosted over the glass. Insistent fingers
scratched long trails in the condensation, but each puff of the dead man's breath filled in these
frantic marks.

"Faster," growled Khelben, his fingers weaving a spell. The pumping arms of gasping, groaning
workmen became a sudden blur. Five more bolts. Ten more. Drill bits were smoking in their holes
as gold melted away. With a sharp crack, one auger snapped. Its wielder fell back, stunned, and
was flung aside like a doll by a furious figure in black robes.
"Faster!" the Lord Mage bellowed.
"He's dying in there!"

Hooves clattered abruptly at the rear of the chapel. Heads snapped around as Madieron charged
into view astride a massive plow horse. The hooves of the great beast struck sparks from the
chapel floor as it thundered through the citizenry, parting merchants and nobles in their finery as a
shark parts a school of fish. One lady was too slow to leap clear, but the Champion of Waterdeep
hauled expertly on the reins, and the gigantic beast reared. Its shaggy forehooves beat ominously

at the air. Anxious hands plucked the moaning woman from under the very shadow of the horse,
as Madieron, eyes blazing, urged it into a gallop, straight at the casket of the Open Lord.

With a sigh, Khelben stepped aside, slapping the shoulders of the frantically working crafters to
get them out of the way, as the juggernaut came pelting down the aisle. Men scrambled, tools
ringing on the stones.

Madieron rode clatteringly to the dais, pulling the horse up severely at the last. The massive
animal reared again, its hooves lashing the air between the chandeliers. Madieron crowded his
mount against the coffin, and those hooves dropped on the glass like twin mauls. "Impenetrable"
glass cracked and shattered. The Champion hauled on the reins, spinning the horse around.

Piergeiron's own fists finished the job, punching glass aside in a scintillating shower of knife-edged
pieces. Madieron leapt from his saddle through the flying shards, to lift Piergeiron from the riven
casket.

"No!" the Open Lord cried again, his voice raw. "No!"

Bleeding and glistening with slivers of glass, Madieron bore Piergeiron to the aisle floor and laid
him down. "You're all right," the giant said awkwardly. "You're free. You're alive."

"But she's not," Piergeiron gasped, clutching Sunderstone's tunic. His eyelids strained at their

stitches. "She's dead!"

Madieron glanced at Shaleen's glass-topped casket. "Who? Who's dead?"

"Eidola," replied the Open Lord. He coughed, blood spattering cracked lips. "I pursued her across

Faerûn, and beyond… through all of time. I pursued her through life, unto death."

Madieron looked up beseechingly to the Blackstaff. Khelben crouched beside the fallen lord of Waterdeep and said, "You've had a long sleep… a short death. You've dreamed."

Piergeiron shook his head, shards of glass and drops of blood raining to the stone floor. "No. I did not dream this. She's dead. Somewhere beneath our feet, she's died."

"Don't speak," urged the Blackstaff.

"I will speak," Piergeiron snarled. "I must speak, or it'll all fade and be forgotten like a dream. It wasn't a dream!"

He struggled to sit up in Madeiron's arms. "I was dead. I've traveled the places of the dead. I've walked other worlds, and journeyed through mirror mazes to find Eidola and bring her back. I've fought tanar'ri and climbed the world tree and plunged into Lethe's waters of forgetfulness; they still cling to me. If I don't tell what befell me now, I'll nevermore remember."

Khelben raised his head to glare at the armsmen, merchants, and nobles crowding around. "I need priests—now!—to heal this man. Are there any tailors or seamstresses here? Someone with a sure hand? The Open Lord needs the stitches out of his eyelids! The rest of you, back! Officers, see to it!"

The Lord Mage leaned back over Piergeiron, shielding the wounded man against any dart or hurled dagger that might forestall the return of the Open Lord to his throne. "Let them tend you, and tell all the stories you wish. Wherever you have been, welcome home, friend."

As folk in their finery scurried to obey Khelben's orders, Piergeiron Paladinson smiled and started to speak.

* * * * *

He surfaced in a deep wood, leaving behind cold, still water. But he was dry, and no water stood nearby, only damp leaf mold. Somewhere beneath it, perhaps, was the deep, eternal darkness he'd ascended through… limitless depths inhabited only by the souls of the dead.

I am dead, he told himself plainly. I am dead.

There were airy dreams of elsewhere: a palace perched above a restless sea, waves as white and loud as clashing swords. Their clamor mingled with bards' songs that wove truth out of thin air. He saw again masked lords and darting daggers, a thousand shadowed conspiracies, saw bright banners fluttering, and heard armsmen shouting a name in jubilant unison—a name also shaped by the hostile lips of those conspirators. A name that belonged to him. Piergeiron. It sounded like some sort of falcon.

Something more came back to him then, lone, shining, and beautiful… a soul that sang his name,

high and pure.

What was her name? It was gone with her. She was gone.

He stood alone, in this wood. It was real; the rest were but fading tatters of forgetfulness. It all meant nothing now. The cloak of scars and sorrows, woven in life to encrust and mottle old souls, making them distinct from all others, was gone. He was Pier—He was a falcon. Nay, he was a Paladin.

Paladin looked about.

This was a verdant place. Trees soared to join earth and endless sky. Vines spiraled across ancient bark, leaves catching scraps of light lancing down from above. Birds coursed in silent lines among the trees. The musk of growing things hung strong in the air. The forest quivered with the tremendous murmur of the world growing. Growing.

Then, slashing through all, came a round, mournful cry, a call long unanswered and despairing. Paladin felt the longing in its haunting wail.

She. There had been a name for her in the world of contingencies and consciousness, but here she had no name save Desire, or Heart's Desire, or Broken Heart, or just… Heart.

The sound of Heart in her hopelessness sent deep sorrow through Paladin. He turned toward the song. It came from there, high above.

He was facing the greatest tree of all, its massive gnarled bole as wide as a mountain. It was the tree, whose roots plunged down through the deeps and (somehow he knew this) beyond, into and out of and through a thousand worlds. It was the tree whose crown cracked the blue shell of arching sky and whose branches held aloft a great diamond as large as worlds. The world tree. A tree that bound worlds together and was worlds altogether. The call came from its crown.

He walked to the tree that loomed like a mountain. It took days. Dreams of otherwhere—dead bodies and cold cellars and crafters with hammers and measuring tapes—intruded. He drifted down into them, and surfaced again after not a blink of time. When at last he reached the tree, he climbed.

There were whole worlds in its bark, hidden in the brown terrain of ragged mountain ridges and

deep valleys. Paladin climbed tirelessly and quickly. He clambered away from strange stinging and swarming creatures who dwelt in some of the valleys, and he learned to avoid their villages but otherwise pressed on as straight as he could.

He fell thrice, and died each time, surfacing again in the strange world of gold-gilded caskets and mourning men. But what is death to a dead man? Always he resurfaced to climb on.

The fourth time he fell, Paladin fell up the tree. Its diamond crown loomed, and Paladin plunged toward it, watching brown ridges race past. The crown grew ever larger. The bark of the tree became slick black skin, and the boughs branched into massive tentacles. Where once there had been leaves, now there were suction cups, broad and oozing, gripping the great diamond. Large as worlds, the gem glittered with the tiny gleams of pinprick stars and wandering moons.

This was no world tree, but something darker and deadlier. A world in itself, huge and alive,

or—no, a creature that wished to be a world. Its thousand limbs in their dark and mighty magnificence clutched the glowing diamond.

He looked at that awesome stone. It drew him up. The lady hung unseen within it, crushed on all sides by titanic, yet balanced, forces. She sang out from its bright depths.

Paladin would save her.

He was suddenly there, beside the diamond, a cage within a cage. In it, entrapped, was Heart, who called to him.

Now he saw how the stone had held so powerful and beautiful a creature as Heart captive so long: the diamond was no clear crystal, but a hall of mirrors.

Reflections, semblances, illusions; the most potent of magics in a world of truth. A labyrinth of lies and deceptions, receding into endless illusions that worked with eye and mind to betray body and soul.

Truth is, in the end, powerless against dazzle and shine.

The mournful throb of Heart came distantly from within.

Mirrors can be broken. Paladin drew steel. He would smash his way into the maze and carve a path inward to Heart.

The luminous mirror before him bore his own determined features. He shattered them and stepped into the slanted space beyond. Angled planes all around gave back his appearance.

The first few reflections showed Paladin as he was, only subtly reversed. His sword arm was switched, his forward knee had been traded for the trailing one. Others held images even farther from…

Paladin gritted his teeth and swung. A delicate magic can slay if it reverses thoughts until self and purpose are lost. Ten images of swordsmen struck in unison.

The world shattered. Another passage opened. Paladin stepped through.

The mirrors he now faced showed him the snout and tusks of a boar, black lashes and snakelike, slit-pupiled eyes, a blood-gorged cockscomb and wattle. He looked like a monster. He was a monster. Monsters must die.

"You fall first," he snarled in sudden rage, and clung to what he was, naming himself aloud as he swung shattering steel. Shards boiled away before him like smoke, and suddenly that unreal and trivial world where his body lay dead swam back, overwhelming all else. Snarling silently to muster his will, he returned, seeking the cry of Heart.

Paladin strode deeper into the diamond. The next mirror held a reflection that moved like him, but had cruel eyes and olive skin—and a sword arm whose flesh gave way to bare bone. Paladin remembered this man from the world he'd left but could give him no name.

He lifted his arm. Bare bones moved in unison. "I'm no assassin," Paladin said fiercely, and heard the eerie reflection make the same resolve, the silver-slim words mocking.

"I fight for what is right. I slay for freedom." Paladin and Assassin spoke those words together. Lie

and truth lay together, indistinguishable from one another. The diamond's power was deepening with each new chamber. It pressed viciously on head and heart.

Heart. Paladin's lips set in a thin line, and his blade flashed out. Assassin cracked. He stared for a moment in surprise, bony sword arm uplifted, before the cloven mirror gave way and slid tinkling to the floor.

Deeper. Up and in. Heart drew him on.

A young man's face confronted him next, full of hope, honest and determined and inexcusably innocent. Paladin swung his blade without hesitation.

It met not chill glass and uncaring silver but soft flesh. The man sobbed, staggered, and fell forward.

A real man? Another warrior seeking Heart? A comrade!

Heart's own sorrow bled into the moan that came from Paladin. He set a hand to the young man's bleeding side.

This one, too, had a name, lost in the wash of truth and illusion. He was in Paladin's mind nothing more or less than Hero. Paladin's touch closed the weeping

wound. Hero rose. No apology or explanation needed to be spoken; Hero understood. Paladin drew and offered his dagger. It was accepted with the ghost of a smile. Side by side, they went on through the silvered maze.

Another young warrior appeared in a mirror, the youthful semblance of Paladin himself.

"I am Jacob. I will battle beside you."

The words bore such earnest weight that Hero motioned Jacob to step from the glass and walk shoulder to shoulder with them.

The fighter emerged. Reflected flesh became momentarily scaly, tentacular, before swimming into solid human flesh! A lie garbed in borrowed shape. Paladin's blade sundered the emerging shapeshifter, dropping him in a thousand shards of ringing glass.

Paladin and Hero nodded warily to each other and pressed on toward the sobbing lady's song. They found themselves in a wide chamber ringed with her—or varying reflections of her. One mirror showed a warrior maiden, clear-eyed and noble. The next held a pirate lass, all black leather and lascivious eyes; a third displayed a meek lady pleading from a tower window; its neighbor showed a medusa with writhing hair. Hundreds of images implored for release from the glass. Hero stood frozen, drawn to each pleading woman.

Paladin shook his head. False images, partial truths. Heart was no idealized image, but a true creature. Paladin would not be seduced by lies told about women. He would be inspired by truths told by them.

Hero nodded, understanding. Young, open, and so vulnerable, he led with his broad, brave heart.

The song rose, mournful, beyond the chamber. Paladin listened and pointed. A curving way opened, nearly hidden between alike imploring images. The two men ventured on.

Fiends lunged without invitation from the glass, a roaring menagerie of rending claws, venom-dripping stingers, scourgelike tails, twisted horns, and smoking spittle. They flooded forth as if the mirrors were portals gaping from the Abyss.

Paladin and Hero stood back to back, blades flashing among tentacles and barbed whiskers. Shrieks arose amid the battle cries. Paladin severed the head of a mantis towering over him, leaping across its carapace to slash the snarling faces of two jackal-men, and shattered the mirror behind them. Cracks segmented shadowy figures who rushed to leap the silver margin, and all collapsed in a rain of shards.

The pommel of Hero's dagger crashed into another mirror, and a dozen fiends tumbled into oblivion. He swung for the next, but flesh interposed itself—scabrous and oozing, cracked and sword-worn. Living meat barred the way to other mirrors, lifting claws and grinning with yellowed teeth.

Crying out the names of their mothers and their gods—names not so dissimilar—Paladin and Hero hacked at fiend flesh, winning through to panel after panel. Dead fiends lay heaped across the silvered floor, strange blood darkening the glass, as gate after gate fell.

Ten living fiends stood atop a hundred dead to guard the last looking glass, aflicker with emerging horrors. Hero and Paladin carved a grim path through them.

The last fiend fell, its left head laid open by Paladin's sword and its right skewered through the eye by Hero's dagger. Black blood steamed, and silence fell.

Standing exhausted, Paladin and Hero looked into the last mirror and saw themselves: two blood-soaked warriors burned by gouting acids, stabbed, slashed and bone-broken. Paladin's sword arm changed direction in two places. A severed beast claw jutted from his temple. Hero's ribs showed through a row of gaping wounds, wherein his organs pulsed through a rain of blood. The comrades were walking dead men, too busy slaying to notice that they should die. Now they had time to look.

Hero wheeled and collapsed, lifeless.

Paladin staggered. His world went black. Falling, he smashed his sword against the glass.

The riven mirror collapsed, and the false wounds it had projected onto Hero and Paladin fell away with it.

At last Paladin understood this house of mirrors. He'd thought it a mind of madness, filled with images twisted to obscure the truth, or a sorcerous cage constructed to hold Heart ever captive behind falsities. But it was neither.

The diamond was a mind but was not mad. It was the mind of a world; in any one facet of the diamond, truth was only partially reflected. Truth dwelt not in one angled view of something too large and complex to be fully seen in a thousand images. Truth dwelt beyond and beneath. It could be apprehended not by staring into one reflection but by staring into them all. Paladin would find Heart not by smashing and slaying but only by combining all reflections into the one true creature they mirrored.

He sheathed his sword, helped Hero rise, and stepped into the space beyond the last mirror they'd

shattered: a mirrored passage that snaked away through deceptive turns. Its silvered panes held
faces: a moon-faced sharper, a much-scarred old pirate, a pale man-giant, a black-bearded mage,
a bronze-skinned man in robes of state, a pair of idiot brothers, a crooked lumber merchant…

Paladin ignored these images, grasping the corners of mirrors and pivoting them slowly, one after
another. He was opening up the passage, creating a large, circular space. Hero did likewise,
pushing back the mirrors on the opposite side of the passage into an inward-curving silver wall.

They worked speedily, repositioning and checking over their shoulders to match alignments. When
they completed the first circle, the diffuse starlight that shone through the interior of the diamond
intensified. They made a second circle beneath the first, pushing back the mirrors of the floor.
When it was done, the room sparkled in warm brilliance.

When they formed the third, the light grew so intense it pushed at the silver and glass it struck,
realigning the other facets of the great diamond. Not merely hundreds but thousands of mirrors
were brought into focus, blazing like festival sconces, each witness to all that had happened since
Heart's disappearance.

At last light surged out to every corner of the diamond—and the vision Hero and Paladin sought
erupted into sizzling incandescence before them. Lightning-white the place blazed, around Heart.

She floated in beauty at the center of it all: a creature of pure light, her raiment a rainbow, her
scepter a staff of lightning, her eyes twin blue flames.

Paladin and Hero fell to their faces before her.

Her song now was one of triumph as her power blazed brighter. The black tentacles clutching the diamond ignited, their flames adding to the brilliance. The globe of mirrors melted away, and a blast of pure force roared out amid the circling stars and wandering moons. With an answering roar the fire spread down the evil tree.

Freed at last, Heart would burn her former captor to oblivion. Her soul would sear the tree away. But what of the world it was rooted in? The worlds upon worlds into which it had sunk its wicked roots? Would they be destroyed, evil and good alike consumed in flames?

Paladin glanced at his comrade. Hero could do it. Hero could whelm the folk of the world below and bring their axes to bear on the base of this horrific tree.

Thousands of axes. Tens of thousands. If they chopped it through, the massive crown, a world unto itself, would pull away among the stars to erupt safely above and beyond all. Hero could do it.

But Paladin could not. This was she whom he sought, the Heart of all his world. If she was destroyed in flame, he would perish with her.

Empowered by the lightning blasts of Heart, Paladin hoisted Hero, bore him to the spinning edge, and flung him down toward the world. He shouted through the firestorm the only words they shared: "Save it!"

Hero understood. Therein lay his greatness. Despite his youth, his fumbling naiveté, the heart so untried and vulnerable in his breast, in the end Hero always understood. And in worlds of truth,

understanding bridged any distance.

Immediately, Hero was at the base of the tree, and at once in every farmstead and village and city clustered about it, exhorting folk to bring their axes, and save their world. He was believed and obeyed. That was the power of understanding in a world of truth.

Paladin felt the first thunderous thousand blows shiver the tree. He staggered, striding against the gale of light and power toward the blazing woman. She recognized him. Something in her knew the garment of scars that cloaked his soul. With a single finger of fire, gentle as a caress, she flung him from the inferno, down to the verdant world below.

All the while he fell, Paladin wept; he'd been so close to his love and now he was hurled farther with each breath.

Just before he reached ground, the massive tree groaned. Cut through, it swayed. The blazing bole turned listlessly once before easing up, away from the ground. It hung in the sky, engulfed in racing flames. A white-hot inferno tumbled up into the arching heavens. It was shrinking into vast distance when it blazed its last.

The flash blinded all who looked at it. It blinded Paladin, where he lay in a scorched glade, and the thunder that followed rattled the teeth in his head. A shock wave of wind slammed into him, thrusting him down through earth and bedrock beneath, whirling him through the swirling subterranean passages of Lethe. Even as he lost consciousness, falling asleep in one world to awaken in another, he knew she was dead.

His Heart's Desire was dead.

"The Tree of Illusion, grown to overbalance the real world in which it has root," mused Khelben, watching the final stitches snipped from the Open Lord's

eyes. "The octopodal crown can be none other than Aetheric III. But what of this diamond?"

"Diamond be damned," hissed Piergeiron as his eyes at last struggled open, blinking into the glaring chandeliers. "Eidola is dead. The Heart is dead."

Khelben leaned over, helping the dead man up. "Perhaps not. Perhaps this glorious soul you saw wasn't Eidola, but—"

Before the Lord Mage could say more, Piergeiron saw the woman who lay in the casket beside his own. He sprawled across it and wept bitterly.

Chapter 4

Another Trial for Noph

In the streets above the cold stone of the palace dungeon, Waterdeep rejoiced beneath a sunset sky.

Piergeiron lived.

He had returned. He'd risen during his own funeral to tell a tale of such mythic force that two dozen bards were writing ballads, in moments snatched between the leap-dances and reels demanded by the crowds. The very sewers of Waterdeep throbbed to the tread of thousands of dancing feet. Piergeiron himself had blessed the revelry from his balcony. Khelben expressed his delight in the form of green and gold fireworks, blazing and popping above the harbor.

It seemed only Noph wasn't rejoicing. He stood in the cell where he'd met with his father, and a fictitious fireball had blasted Artemis Entreri and Trandon into twin piles of ash—this wood ash, by his boots.

Noph growled to himself. Appearances, facades, deceptions; how could Khelben nod so sagely at Piergeiron's morality tale when the Blackstaff himself had

just perpetrated a treasonous deception on the entire city? "Being a hero is the most confusing job in the world," Noph complained aloud.

"Well now, getting down to the brass, you hit the snail on the prosuberbial head there," a basso voice answered, from disconcertingly nearby.

Noph looked up into the tragicomic mope of Becil Boarskyr's face, the cell bars stretching his red jowls back into a doglike grimace. It was not a pretty sight. "Mayhap," Becil added, "that's on account of because it's not a job."

"What are you talking about?" Noph snapped wearily.

"A job's something they give you compensatory damages for doing it. But heroes don't get any monetary renunciation. If they did, they'd be just missionaries."

"Mercenaries," Noph corrected reflexively.

"Yes, that's it, mercy killers—"

"Mercenaries!" Noph snarled. "People who fight for money: mercenaries!"

Becil nodded amiably. "Yes, mammonaries. Which is why being a hero doesn't provide a fellow the fine emnities of lordly life."

"Amenities."

"Amen to that, yourself. Anyway, when a hero does his goodliness, it's like he doesn't get fiscal repercussions because it's not him who gets paid but the whole world."

Noph suddenly understood. The whole world gets paid. He stared at the twin dust piles.

Khelben hadn't benefited from the jailbreak. He'd nothing to gain from keeping Eidola's identity a secret. He'd not seized power during Piergeiron's long incapacity. In each case, Waterdeep had been made the richer, not the Lord Mage. He was a hero

because he acted on behalf of everyone
but himself. The whole world got paid.

"Now, as long as we're conversating about those of us who worship mammon getting the chance
to go prostate before the sanctuary of our golden god—"

"Prostrate," Noph corrected irritably. "Don't throw around words you don't know."

"I'm planning to expose myself about the jailbreak unless I get some commercial satisfaction."

"You what?" Noph asked, emerging from the empty cell to glare at Becil.

"I observated the deception you and that Blackshaft perpetuated on the Waterdousians," Becil
said. "And so, I'll need twenty thousand gold for you to buy the pleasure of me keeping my mouth
shut."

"You're going to blackmail Khelben?"

"Blackboil is such a dirty word—"

"No one will listen to you."

"I have the truth."

"It can't be called truth when put to such purposes."

"You'll see."

"I already see," Noph assured him darkly, and then stiffened. An insistent thumping echoed down
the hall, followed by muffled shrieks and curses.

Noph ran toward the sound, passing along corridors to a solidly barred floor hatch. He pulled the
bar and flung back the hatch. Beneath was a latched iron grating, its bars as thick as his wrist,
and beneath that a deep well. A rickety ladder clung to one side of its shaft. The shouts and
screams came from the depths below: desperate human voices.

"I wonder how much the world'll be paid for this," Noph mused grimly, as he yanked a lantern

from a wall hook, undid the latch, swung back the grating, and started climbing down the well.

His legs made long shadows in the lantern light. He felt like a spider scuttling down a hole. Real spiderwebs broke as he descended through them; they clung to him in a gossamer net.

Ancient rungs cracked under his feet. The lantern light didn't reach the bottom of the well. How deep did this shaft go? The dungeons under both castle and palace were below the sewers, he'd once been told, and he'd come another two hundred feet, at least. The chill made fleeting smoke of his breath.

This could only be a way into Undermountain.

The cacophony of shouts, roars, and shrieks grew deafening. It sounded as if whoever was down there wouldn't survive much longer.

A smooth stone floor became visible below. It belonged to a small chamber, sporting only a door of iron-banded oak in one wall. Leaping from the ladder, Noph landed in a crouch. His feet stirred thick dust as he rushed toward the door. A fat oak beam was cradled across it; the brackets that held it glowed with blue motes of power.

The circling sparks settled into letters, spelling out a clear warning: DO NOT OPEN UNDER PAIN OF DEATH.

"Open up!" a man shouted, from just beyond the barred door. It shuddered with blows from fists or hammers or axes but did not give way. There was a slim crack between the boards, and an eye glared at Noph through it. "Open up, or we'll die!"

Noph looked again at the stern inscription. "You'll have to find another way out!"

"There is no other way out, blast you! We're barely holding off a pair of deep ogres. Open up!"

"Then I'll be barely staving them off," Noph pointed out. "Besides, there's an inscription. A prohibition. A law. I can't compromise the security of—"

"Yes, yes, Piergeiron's Palace! We know! We're agents of his… or some of us are!"

"But under penalty of death—"

"It's the death of four or the death of one, lad. Save your own skin and you've doomed ours. Open the door, and we can fight side by side."

The choice was obvious. It was written large in enchanted letters before him. If the folk trapped on the other side really were agents of Piergeiron, they'd not ask him to defy laws and jeopardize the security of the palace. What if the deep ogres won past, and climbed up to rampage through the palace? More likely there were no deep ogres, and this was a band of villains wanting to trick their way into the palace. What were the lives of four unknowns worth in the balance against his?

The choice was obvious.

A terrible scream came through the door, followed by a wet thrashing sound.

"I feel like a gods-damned traitor," Noph hissed, heaving the beam out of its bracket.

The enspelled timber had not even struck the floor before the door crashed open. Noph fell back, sword hissing out.

A moon-faced man tumbled through first, his fancy clothes much slashed and beribboned with blood. Stumbling over him came a soot-besmirched dwarf.

"Belgin! Rings!" Noph gasped. "What—?"

A slender woman in glimmering armor staggered out next.

"Aleena!" Noph yelped.

A weak, answering smile showed through the blood and grime on her face as she collapsed beside the others. There was a man behind her, a silver-garbed paladin. Miltiades! The paladin backed slowly into the room, his warhammer ringing and swinging with the profound, determined motion of a blacksmith's maul.

His anvil was a gigantic creature. Its eyes—dinner plates awash in blood—glowed furiously from grimy folds of flesh. The sheer weight of the ogre's lips shaped a permanent scowl around jagged green teeth. Hands as big as men groped from the darkness, snatching at the paladin's armor. Only the persistent, ringing blows of the hammer kept those hands at bay.

If the ogre emerged from the cramped passage, they'd all be slain. And another beast would follow the first.

A sudden flare of flame drew Noph's eyes. The oak beam he'd pulled from the door was afire. It rattled and gave off a high whistling as the magics laid on it did their work. The heat coming off it was already enough to shrivel the cobwebs clinging to Noph into smoky tracers.

The choice was obvious.

The young hero dropped his sword, bent, and hefted the hissing beam. Fire raced across his hands and up his arms. Agony stabbed through him. He snarled, heaving the timber above his head, and lunged at the ogre, thrusting it like a spear into the monster's gaping maw. One end distended the squalling beast's throat. Green teeth clamped on blazing wood.

"Down," Noph shouted, shoving Miltiades to the floor. They fell together and rolled.

A corona of fire flared from the ogre's astonished face, and its mantle of hair ignited with a whoosh, standing away from its head. The beast's throat bulged out like a bullfrog's. The log in its chattering teeth flared bright red, then white, and then exploded.

What was left of the beast fell, minced and bloody meat now. It was followed, with a slowly growing roar, by a rush of dust, rocks, and rubble.

When the shaking ended and the echoes faded, dust hung thick in the antechamber. The passage was closed by rubble. Noph rolled stiffly off the pile, looking grimly at the fire-blackened flesh below his wrists. He'd be a match for Entreri, now, but missing two hands instead of one.

There was much coughing. Miltiades and Aleena rose, and after some grunting moments, the dwarf Rings and the moon-faced sharper Belgin followed.

The latter squinted at Noph. "A long shot, youngling, but a gamble that paid off." His was the voice that had implored Noph through the doorway.

Noph did not reply. Bloodied and battered, he slumped beside the lantern. In its light, his figure seemed sculpted in gold.

"Noph?" growled Miltiades, coughing. "I should have known you'd be alive to rescue us like this."

* * * * *

Piergeiron's quarters were far from the dark and dusty grave of the ogre. Bright and filled with a sea breeze, looking out at the clear blue air above Waterdeep, the chambers seemed as high as golden griffons and white stacks of cloud. Outside one set of tall windows, the Sea of Swords glimmered with morning sunlight. Past another sprawled

Waterdeep in all its splendor, roofs of red and green tiles glowing like rubies and emeralds in the sun.

The company, too, was an improvement on headless ogres. Noph and the four who'd stumbled through the door had been bathed, bandaged, and healed. Noph's new hands tingled from time to time; he'd been restored by the same priest who'd given Entreri his arm back.

The palace healers had given the heroes loose white robes, similar to those of Piergeiron. They all looked like monks, or devout priests, fitting in this place of white marble and silver trim. Only Khelben wore black. That, too, seemed right. He was black thunder to Piergeiron's white lightning.

Now both listened to a silver paladin. "—Unwise in the extreme, I'd say, for a young man charged with guarding the dungeon to open it to attack from Undermountain."

"Yes, Miltiades," the Blackstaff soothed patiently. While the others hovered in an uncertain circle around the Open Lord's sickbed, Khelben lurked by one of the windows, his attention on a bronze kettle perched in a quietly hissing brazier. "Yet if he hadn't, you'd all be dead now, correct?"

The warrior seemed irritated. "Better we die than let ogres into the palace to kill the Open Lord."

"I've been dead before," Piergeiron noted wryly. He drew in a deep breath of tea-scented air. "I'll be dead again, too."

"Better that none but an ogre die," Khelben added. His deft hands slipped into a window seat and drew forth teacups. "Noph made a decision. An heroic decision, and in the end the right one."

Belgin nodded agreement. "Sometimes you've got to place your bets and roll the dice."

Miltiades steamed, a human counterpart to Khelben's kettle. "That wall of rubble won't keep them back for long. The security of the palace—"

"Is being taken care of," snapped Khelben. "Have the courtesy not to pillory the man who saved your life."

"Enough," Piergeiron said wearily. "I called for a report, not an argument."

Miltiades visibly caught hold of his temper. "Yes," he said. "Well, the company of paladins was necessarily parted in the dungeons of King Aetheric III. Half our folk, my comrade Kern among them, remained behind to heal young Kastonoph and to seek out and destroy the bloodforge. I understand they succeeded in the former, but not the latter."

Khelben was suddenly at the paladin's side, a cup of tea steaming in his grasp. "And did you succeed in your task, to rescue Eidola? Tea?"

Flustered, Miltiades took the cup. "Yes, thank you. I mean, no, we didn't. But we found out… the rescue was not… that is—"

Sipping from his own cup, Piergeiron said gently, "Take a moment. Gather your thoughts."

Miltiades took one swallow and set his cup aside. "I led the group seeking Eidola. We pursued her from the dungeon beneath the palace of Aetheric III, even, as I'm told by Kastonoph, as the squid lord struggled in his death throes."

The young man nodded confirmation, brushing the crumbs of a biscuit from his lips.

"He's also told me you know of your bride's true nature. Is this correct?" Miltiades asked stiffly.

Piergeiron winced. "Tell me again, so all is out in the open."

"Well, this comes as no surprise to the Lord Mage or your daughter," Miltiades said heavily. "Your supposed bride was in truth a greater doppelganger, an agent of the Unseen who aimed to rule Waterdeep not only from your bed, but through your mind. She'd been created, I know not how, in the image of your dead wife, Shaleen, and empowered, through subtle magics, to take hold of your mind. I am not surprised her abduction sent you into a coma, so powerful was her hold on you. I'm only surprised it didn't kill you."

"It did kill me," Piergeiron corrected. "I descended into death to follow her… to bring her back."

He set down his teacup, gaze suddenly distant. "She was no illusion. I pursued someone real, powerful, brilliant and true. The presence I found there flung me out of death, back into life. That was no doppelganger."

"Ah, yes," Miltiades replied. "In any case, Eidola was among the most powerful weapons of the Unseen, a creature meant to spread their influence throughout Faerûn. There must be others such as her about."

"In fact, through your efforts and my own, their ranks have been thinned in the past month," Khelben noted. "Aleena and I have been doing more than brewing tea."

Miltiades gave the Lord Mage a dark look. "I'd like to know why you two waited so long. Aleena told me you both knew the truth about Eidola before the wedding. Why didn't you stop her then?"

"She was a fine piece of work," Khelben replied. "Dangerous, yes, but less so than those who created her. If we'd destroyed Eidola, her creators would have made another creature to infiltrate

the palace, and done a better job of it. We needed her alive to trace her makers, which I've

done." There was unmistakable finality in his voice.

The Lord Mage set down his teacup and added, "Until then I'd fitted her with a girdle of righteousness, binding her actions."

"I—ahem—am the one who removed the belt in the mage-king's dungeon," Noph volunteered, redness creeping up his neck. "I thought it was a… that is, she implied… er, I still thought she was a woman of honor, you see, and what more ignominious torment is there for such a one as… well, a chastity belt?"

Eyebrows lifted around the room. Hiding a smile, Khelben came to Noph's rescue. "Another decision that turned out to be right. By removing the belt, you revealed at last what Eidola really was and almost lost your life demonstrating it. The belt had served its purpose by then; once Eidola was abducted, I hired an assassin to track her down in the Utter East and kill her. The best such blade in all Faerûn."

"Too bad he failed," Miltiades said disdainfully.

Khelben shrugged. "No matter; he's dead. And where he failed, you succeeded. You ended up killing the woman you were sworn to rescue."

"Yes," Miltiades replied, despite himself. Scowling, he reached into a bag at his belt, and drew forth the slender hand of a woman, severed mid-forearm. It was rigid, bleached of all color, and clutched a gigantic diamond.

Sudden stillness governed the room. Miltiades bore the hand to the Open Lord's bedside. "Eidola is well and truly dead. I brought this back as proof. We've not been able, by means muscular or

magical, to tear the gem from her grasp. The gem holds her soul. Fearing the Unseen might use it to create Eidola again, we bring it to you for Khelben to deal with."

Vapor from Piergeiron's teacup spun lazily around the lord as he gently took Eidola's hand in his own. For a moment, gazing at the thing, he seemed to see the grasping octopodal tree of his dream.

"You say what she was, and I believe you. Her mind spell nearly killed me, and yet…" He turned the grisly trophy over and over in his grasp. "I cannot shake the sense that what I met in the world of the dead was no false lady… no malicious trickery."

The change in his face was so subtle that no one there could have ascribed it to a shifting crease or a widening pupil. But all of them felt the silent agony underlying it. Piergeiron drew in a long, shuddering breath, and said, "To me, she was not a monster. To the people of Waterdeep, she was none other than my bride. She's gone, so what does it matter what she really was? To me, to the people, let her remain a vision of good."

Miltiades gazed down at his boots, clearly shocked and not knowing what to say. Rings and Belgin stood in respectful silence. Aleena looked at Khelben, back beside his kettle. Noph's eyes met the Open Lord's, and in the young hero's gaze dawned understanding and admiration.

"Hold," Khelben said gently. "Before this gem-bearing hand can be laid to rest, the soul within must be dispersed. I anticipated the truth of this diamond. There's only one sort of gem a doppelganger would cling to so strongly."

He took the severed hand from Piergeiron and held it up, his

eyes glinting back its reflected light.

"Now that we've all had at least a sip of the tea I brewed—a pleasant drink and protection against soul possession—it should be safe to discover just what Eidola might have to say for herself."

The company fell back to give the wizard room. A wide-eyed Miltiades lifted his now-cool cup and downed it to the dregs.

Khelben's hand began an intricate dance in the air about the jewel. Purple and green mists trailed his fingers with each arcane gesture. Then dark and menacing words came from his lips. Mists swirled around the stone. The incantation sounded again by itself, the words seeming to echo with the vicious barbed edges of ancient evils brought into the light of a new day.

Up from the mists swirled a cloud of smoke that shivered, rippled, and became a feminine face, eyes closed, high cheekbones almost too beautiful.

"Shaleen!" Piergeiron gasped in sudden hope.

The vision's eyes opened. Her pupils were vermilion slits, glowing with hatred. "All you wanted was me, Piergeiron. All I wanted was all you had. We could have done very well for each other."

"Begone, vile beast!" Khelben growled. "Let only the memory of your outward virtue remain!"

In the moment before Eidola's soul dissipated forever into the bright morning breeze, her humanity melted away. A gray-skinned, dull-eyed, wholly inhuman something stared hatefully at them all.

Interlude

Musing and Madness

I'm no longer dead, but on some level I must be mad.

Mad with loss, first for my Shaleen, and now for my Eidola. It's the privilege, perhaps the responsibility, of survivors, especially mad survivors, to remember the dead always, to reassemble them not out of trivial facts but eternal verities.

If we must all die—and we must, of that I'm sure—at least let what remains of us in the hearts and hopes and dreams of friends be what was best and brightest. Death can have the rest.

Perhaps I am mad, Miltiades, but let me mourn. Perhaps I am heroic, Noph, but do not overindulge me. Perhaps I am both mad and heroic, for what are humans but those who know they'll die and go on living, madly heroic? Whatever I am does not matter. Whatever she was does not matter. Judge if you wish and come to your own conclusions, Water deep. I ask one thing only…

Mourn with me.

Chapter 5

Having Met the Open Lord on Two Previous Occasions, Death Drops by for One Last Visit, Delivers a Housewarming Gift, and Heads Off to Other Engagements

Khelben watched from his all-too-accustomed spot in the balcony of the renovated chapel. There were solemn acolytes, of course, and glauren and all groaning their way through yet another dirge. This rendition of the funeral march, the third in one week, at last captured the true spirit of the music. Ponderous. Torpid. Grating. Bilious. Not merely lifeless but verging on putrific.

Khelben wouldn't have attended, but he had to support his luckless friend Piergeiron in his time of greatest need. He was also on hand to prevent Lasker

Nesher from using the chance to grandstand. He would not have come, save that he knew what would inevitably follow.

The rest of Waterdeep had turned out eagerly, almost hungrily. To them, this was the funeral of a princess. Already, gossip had piled tale upon idle tale, building Eidola up into tragic proportions. Folk who had never seen, let alone met, her fell upon each others' shoulders in sobbing grief. More had been spent on flowers in two days than had been spent on shipbuilding in the past two years. The chapel was a veritable garden of white and green, all destined tomorrow to be as dead as the woman they were meant for.

Piergeiron had been right. After all the confusion of the last month, the people needed to mourn, wanted to mourn. So did the Open Lord. Even Khelben felt reluctantly moved by the common sorrow, the grand whelming of heart-pouring loss.

Into the midst of solemn flowers and weeping witnesses came the once-dead Open Lord. Mighty in bright-polished armor, Piergeiron moved with slow reverence up the aisle, bearing a discreetly folded silken cloth that held the hand of his mortal bride.

In the quivering light of the chandeliers, he looked old, wan, and utterly alone. He moved in time to the death march, dignifying its overwrought strains with his patient stride. Khelben suddenly saw how acutely important this was to Piergeiron. He straightened in his seat.

The Open Lord's demeanor had the same effect on the rest of the congregation. He moved slowly forward, a tiny boat drifting past waves that could easily swamp or overturn it. Eyes turned first to the bundle the man held, and then to his face, and last to the floor.

After a last agonized refrain of the dirge, the Open Lord reached Shaleen's gold and glass casket.
The music ended, echoing into silence. Not a breath stirred the air. The white-robed priest of Ao
waited, eulogy in hand.

No one coughed. No one could be heard to breathe. Piergeiron stood a long while gazing down at
the magically restored body of his first love, Shaleen. Her casket had been moved to the center of
the funeral dais. Atop it rested a small case of gold and glass, fashioned in the same style as the
larger box. This case lay open.

With great reverence, Piergeiron laid the bundle gently into the case. He drew back the silk and
arranged it carefully around the hand and the diamond it clutched. Then, with a sigh, he fitted the
glass cover down atop the case and turned the lock screws at the corners.

He lifted watery eyes to the priest of Ao, who inhaled deeply to begin his eulogy.

Then it happened. The diamond, bright already between the elegant fingers of Lady Eidola, grew
brighter still. It was as though the facets within it were being aligned to focus the light they

reflected. Folk gasped as the radiance built swiftly to a lantern-bright blaze. Eidola's fingers,
suddenly scaly and black against the glorious gem, caught fire and flared away to ash. Then the
silk ignited in a flash that was almost unnoticeable beside the brilliant glow of the gem.

Piergeiron could do nothing but stand in dumbfounded astonishment, gazing at the starlike stone.
Then he fell back, faint, into arms clad in black wool. The Blackstaff was behind him, having made
his usual descent from the balcony. The mage was

whispering into Piergeiron's ear: "… no need to fear. I'd suspected as much. Why would Eidola have a soul-stone at all, unless it contained the very creature upon whom she was modeled? Eidola is gone forever, but another soul is emerging…"

The fire was so hot now that it was melting the gold base of the small casket.

"… used this soul-gem to create Eidola. This, now, isn't her soul, but that of the woman after whom she was fashioned…"

Gold drops rained down from the case into the casket of Shaleen, forming a hot puddle between her feet.

"… they did it again. Yon candle sconces on the casket must be forged from the candlesticks that brought the bloodforge warriors here. They must've melted them down again—trust Waterdhavians—and made the coffer for the hand from some of it. It's a conduit for the soul in the gem. The soul has sensed its own body…"

The gem tumbled through the hole it had melted, falling into the puddle of liquid metal. There, it flared so bright that even Khelben fell back, dragging Piergeiron with him. Shaleen's casket became opaquely brilliant. All assembled Waterdeep winced away from it. Then just as suddenly the casket went black.

Piergeiron pulled free of the Lord Mage and stumbled to the foot of the coffin. He saw hands moving, pressing against the inside of the glass.

"Shaken!"

His heartfelt shout shattered the shocked silence, and a thousand throats took up the name in a thunderous chorus. The one they called on clawed at the

inside of her coffin just as her husband had done before.

"Right," Khelben called calmly, reminding all who heard it that he'd been through this before. "Crafters, bring your pry bars and augers! Priests: prayers and gauze." He turned to smile at a mop-haired man-giant. "And, yes, Madieron, see if you can't lay hands on a plow horse somewhere."

In the ensuing bustle and excited roar, Piergeiron spun away from the coffin. His eyes were sharp again and piercing. The fog was gone from him. He sought one man: a certain silver paladin with a penchant for hidebound heroism and a hammer as large as all outdoors.

"Miltiades!" Piergeiron cried, reaching the man he sought and clapping him on one ornamental epaulet, "how's about I have a look at your hammer?"

The paladin gaped at him, bewildered. "What?"

"Come now, Miltiades, don't be stingy," Piergeiron roared. "The lads and lasses of three continents are talking about this golden hammer you wield. It's not as though I'd dent it."

Blinking, as stiff as always, Miltiades blurted, "Well, of course not. It's not as if… I mean to say, if you can't be trusted… er, that is—" He unslung the mighty weapon. "Here."

"Thanks," said Piergeiron, his old humor sparkling in his eyes.

He strode back through the carnival of crafters and clergy and gawkers, crowded eight deep around the casket where his wife struggled. His very presence cleared a path.

Knees against the still-warm gold, Piergeiron hoisted the great sledge over his head and cried out,

"If ever there was Justice, in the name of Tyr—!"

And the hammer fell.

Some say it was not the paladin's golden hammer but a crack of lightning sent by Tyr himself that leapt down through the chapel to strike the glass-covered coffin. But such folk were often enough wrong about daily weather predictions to call into question their grasp of divine thunderstorms.

Others said Khelben the Blackstaff worked an enchantment so powerful that it not only left the Lord Mage drained for three days but gave Halaster in Undermountain a splitting headache and temporarily enhanced the power and endurance of another smaller though no less mythically proportioned hammer in the possession of one Old Mage of Shadowdale.

Those with honest eyes, more interested in one man's simple passion than all the Tyr-storms and spells on Toril, say that the hammer blow was borne home by nothing more than Piergeiron's love for Shaleen.

A crack like thunder... a burst of glass... and as the shining fragments flew skyward, Piergeiron lifted his lady free.

Glass showered down.

A great cheer fountained up.

Even Miltiades was elated. He would later describe the event as nothing less than a divine epiphany.

Piergeiron swung his lady around into an embrace. "Shaleen! You're alive!" He clutched her tightly, driving the new breath from her lungs. "I went down into death to find you. I dreamed of you entrapped in a great diamond, and here you are!"

"Here I am," she replied, wondering and solemn. There was a moment of distance, of silent

abstraction, and then the wide, lopsided grin of old spread itself across her face.

Piergeiron buried that grin with a kiss, and the best and brightest of all high Waterdeep were reduced to hooting adolescents shouting out encouragements.

The dirge-musicians struck up a lively reel, and in moments all the room was dancing. The cries, shouts, and laughter made a greater din than the midnight battle that had started this whole crazed affair of diamonds and death and the Utter East. Flailing arms and tossing up gowns, the

dancers spilled out into the halls of the palace, and from there into the streets.

With a spell that made his voice thunder, Khelben stopped the music. "Hold! What is this unseemly hurly-burly? Jigs? Reels? Dancing in the chapel? Kissing and cavorting? These are not seemly things for so reverent and auspicious a ceremony!"

"What ceremony?" shouted back Lasker Nesher sourly. He was perhaps the only Waterdhavian not cavorting. "This is the third time you've thrown a funeral, and each time the body gets up and dances. There's no ceremony! I'm never coming to a funeral here again!"

"There's no funeral ceremony," Khelben replied, "but if those two keep kissing that way, there'd better be a wedding!"

This time it was an elated Piergeiron himself who answered, "What're you squawking about, Old Crow? This is my wife!"

"Oh, no, she's not!" the mage thundered so definitively that a chill and cries of dismay ran through the crowd. "I was at your wedding to Shaleen. In my clear

recollection, your vows involved the
words 'Until death do us part.'"

"Yes," Piergeiron confirmed slowly, realization dawning.

Khelben shook his beard like a lion shaking out its mane. "Well, I don't know a couple around here
who's been more dead than you two!"

"A wedding!" Noph shouted suddenly, and the cry carried through the crowd.

"Yes!" Khelben cried. "This began with two attempts at wedding Eidola—may she rest in
peace—and ended with three tries at burying Shaleen. We can't have the funerals outnumber the
weddings! So to your seats, everyone! You two lovebirds: to me!"

The roar of the crowd redoubled as nobles and guildsmen clambered across benches, musicians
tuned instruments like madmen, and the priest of Ao shredded his eulogy, hurled it into the air,
and paced in a tight circle, trying to recall what he could of the wedding rite.

Through all this tumult, Piergeiron reached Khelben at the back of the chapel. "Well, Lord Mage,
you were such an observant witness the last time I married Shaleen, I must ask you to be best
man this time!"

Khelben's gray-grizzled beard didn't quite hide his rare but rueful smile. "Thanks, but nay. I want
to keep my hands free. This is one ceremony I don't want interrupted." He put a hand on the
Open Lord's shoulder and pointed at a particular member of the crowd. "Besides, there's a better
candidate—"

"Better than the Lord Mage of Waterdeep?"

"Here's a young man who single-handedly foiled an assassination attempt at your last wedding,
rounded up the conspirators, bravely fought bloodforge

warriors and fiends and his own fears,
revealed Eidola for what she was, rescued Miltiades and his fellows numerous times, and has in
this month done nothing but tirelessly fight for the people of Waterdeep. He's even taught me a
few things about heroism. In fact, I think so highly of Noph Nesher that I suggest he join us as a
Lord of Waterdeep."

Piergeiron smiled. "Noph Nesher? That man there? That tanned, brawny scrapper—the one rising
just now to give his seat to yon fat lady? Wasn't he just a boy locked away in my dungeon during
the last wedding? He seems a completely new man."

Khelben nodded. "So do you, friend. So do you."

Postlude

Lord and Lady

How has this happened?

In one evening, I've been transformed from that inward-shrinking worm back into Piergeiron

Paladinson, Open Lord of Waterdeep. The will of dust has changed. All of me sings. All that was
once sundered has come together.

Ah, well, I should've expected transformations. I chose to orbit a changeable star. Shaleen. It is so

good to hear your breath, to feel your warmth beside me.

Awake again? Heigh ho, girl, but when you rise from the dead, you rise!

Oh, to sleep… But that's not the point of honeymoons, is it?

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